



Trying to read the Will of Zeus

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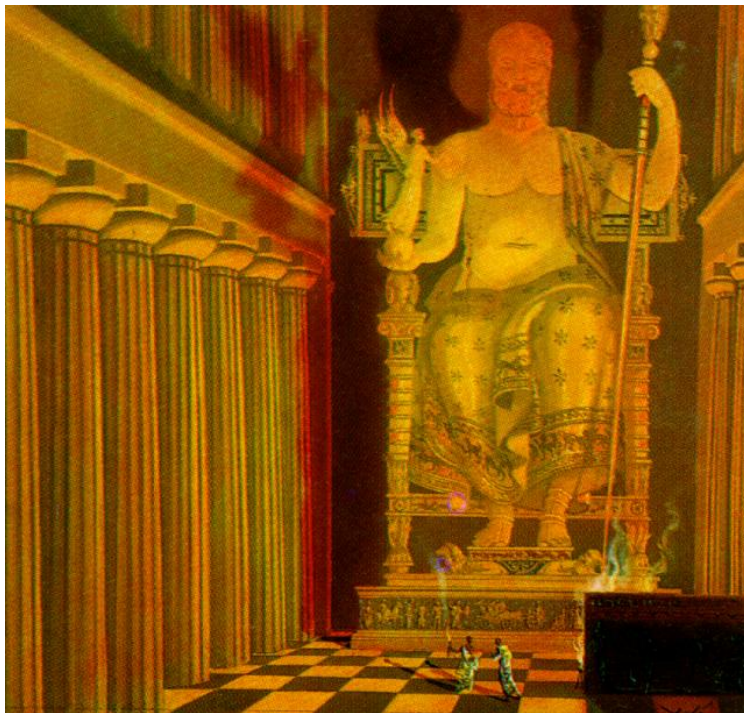
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Trying to read the Will of Zeus

May 26, 2016 By Gregory Nagy listed under [By Gregory Nagy](#)Comments off [Edit This](#)

For almost fifty years now, I have been consistently translating the Homeric expression *Dios boulē*, which we find at the beginning of the *Iliad* (1.5), as 'the Will of Zeus', not as 'the Plan of Zeus'. To put it in terms of what I have published, I have been consistent in using the expression 'the Will of Zeus' instead of 'the Plan of Zeus' in four books of mine that deal primarily with Homeric poetry. On the other hand, I switched to translating *Dios boulē* consistently as 'the Plan of Zeus' in two other books of mine. I see no contradiction here, since I have always understood the Will of Zeus to be the functional equivalent of the plot that gives shape to any given epic, and that is how the Will of Zeus can be understood to be the same thing as the Plan of Zeus. But there was still a specific reason for my switching my translation in the two books I just mentioned, and that was because I needed to concentrate on the differences in plot that we see at work in two different epics, that is, in the Homeric *Iliad* and in the *Cypria* of the epic Cycle. In terms of equating the plot of an epic with the Plan of Zeus, we see here two different plots corresponding to two different Plans of Zeus. But is the difference here mutually contradictory? We may be tempted to answer "yes," guessing that any mutual contradictions in constructing the plots of different epics may be not all that much of a problem for different poets, but I will argue that such a guess underestimates the theological importance of the Will of Zeus as an idea that fueled the very essence of epic in Homeric poetry and beyond. It is one thing to think that there can exist, say, two mutually contradictory Plans of Zeus, but it is quite another thing to imagine that Zeus could contradict himself in expressing his Will. The Will or Plan of Zeus, I argue, needs to be read as a theological idea. It is not only a poetic idea. And if the Will or Plan of Zeus is a theological as well as a poetic idea, I further argue, the initial impression of mutual contradiction between the plots of the *Iliad* and the *Cypria* may be dispelled. Zeus may have different Plans at different times, but his Will may still be seen as constant, fully consistent with the cosmos over which he presides.

[\[Essay continues here...\]](#)

"Statue of Olympic Zeus" (1954). 38×40.6cm, oil on canvas. Salvador Dalí (1904–1989). [Image via WikiArt.](#)

§1. For almost fifty years now, I have been consistently translating the Homeric expression *Dios boulē*, which we find at the beginning of the *Iliad* (1.5), as 'the Will of Zeus', not as 'the Plan of Zeus'. To put it in terms of what I have published, I have been consistent in using the expression 'the Will of Zeus' instead of 'the Plan of Zeus' in four books of mine that deal primarily with Homeric poetry: BA = *The Best of the Achaeans* (1979/1999), PH = *Pindar's Homer* (1990a), HR = *Homeric Responses* (2003), and H24H = *The*

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Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours (2013). I can be certain in making this claim of consistency because I ran a word-search in all four books. On the other hand, I switched to translating *Dios boulē* consistently as 'the Plan of Zeus' in two other books of mine, HC = Homer the Classic (2009|2008) and HPC = Homer the Preclassic (2010|2009). I see no contradiction here, since I have always understood the Will of Zeus to be the functional equivalent of the plot that gives shape to any given epic, and that is how the Will of Zeus can be understood to be the same thing as the Plan of Zeus. But there was still a specific reason for my switching my translation in the two books I just mentioned, and that was because I needed to concentrate on the differences in plot that we see at work in two different epics, that is, in the Homeric Iliad and in the Cypria of the epic Cycle. In terms of equating the plot of an epic with the Plan of Zeus, we see here two different plots corresponding to two different Plans of Zeus. But is the difference here mutually contradictory? We may be tempted to answer "yes," guessing that any mutual contradictions in constructing the plots of different epics may be not all that much of a problem for different poets, but I will argue that such a guess underestimates the theological importance of the Will of Zeus as an idea that fueled the very essence of epic in Homeric poetry and beyond. It is one thing to think that there can exist, say, two mutually contradictory Plans of Zeus, but it is quite another thing to imagine that Zeus could contradict himself in expressing his Will. The Will or Plan of Zeus, I argue, needs to be read as a theological idea. It is not only a poetic idea. And if the Will or Plan of Zeus is a theological as well as a poetic idea, I further argue, the initial impression of mutual contradiction between the plots of the Iliad and the Cypria may be dispelled. Zeus may have different Plans at different times, but his Will may still be seen as constant, fully consistent with the cosmos over which he presides.

§2. I start my overall argumentation by quoting my translation of the first ten verses of the Iliad, and I take my quotation from a recent book where I render *Dios boulē* as 'the Will of Zeus':

11 Μῆνιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος 12 οὐλομένην, ἣ μυρὶ Ἀχαιοὺς ἄλγε' ἔθηκε 13 πολλὰς δ' ἰφθίμους ψυχὰς Ἄϊδι προΐαψεν 14 ἠρώων, αὐτοὺς δὲ ἐλώρια τεύχε κύνεσσιν 15 οἰωνοῖσι τε πᾶσι, Διὸς δ' ἐτελείετο βουλή, 16 ἐξ οὗ δὴ τὰ πρῶτα διαστήτην ἐρίσαντε 17 Ἀτρεΐδης τε ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν καὶ Διὸς Ἀχιλλεύς. 18 Τίς τάρ σφωε θεῶν ἕριδι ξυνέθηκε μάχασθαι; 19 Λητοῦς καὶ Διὸς υἱός· ὃ γὰρ βασιλῆϊ χολωθεῖς 10 νοῦσον ἀνά στρατὸν ὄρσε κακὴν, ὀλέκοντο δὲ λαοί.

11 Anger [mēnis], goddess, sing it, of Achilles son of Peleus— 12 disastrous [oulomenē] anger that made countless pains [algea] for the Achaeans, 13 and many steadfast lives [psūkhai] it drove down to Hādēs, 14 heroes' lives, but their bodies themselves it made prizes for dogs 15 and for all birds—and the Will of Zeus was reaching its fulfillment [telos] — 16 sing starting from the point where the two—I now see it—first had a falling out, engaging in strife [eris], 17 I mean, [Agamemnon] the son of Atreus, lord of men, and radiant Achilles. 18 So, which one of the gods was it who impelled the two to fight with each other in strife [eris]? 19 It was [Apollo] the son of Leto and of Zeus. For he [= Apollo], infuriated at the king [= Agamemnon], 10 caused an evil disease to arise throughout the mass of warriors, and the people were getting destroyed.

Iliad 1.1-10[1]

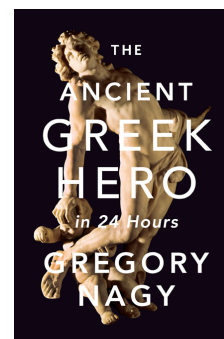
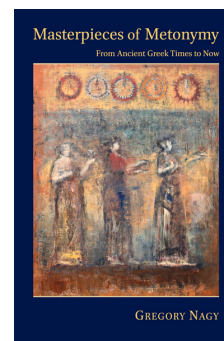
§3. For contrast, I now quote my translation of seven verses that survive from the beginning of the Cypria, taking my quotation (with slight adjustments) from a recent book of mine where I render *Dios boulē* as 'the Plan of Zeus':

11 ἦν ὅτε μυρία φύλα κατὰ χθόνα πλαζόμεν' αἰεὶ 12 <ἀνθρώπων ἐπίεζε> βαρυστέρνου πλάτος αἴης, 13 Ζεὺς δὲ ἰδὼν ἐλέησε καὶ ἐν πυκιναῖς πρᾶπιδεσσι 14 κουφίσει ἀνθρώπων παμβώτορα σύνθετο γαῖαν, 15 ῥίπισσας πολέμου μεγάλην ἔριν Ἰλιακοῖο, 16 ὄφρα κενώσειεν θανάτω βάρος. οἱ δ' ἐνὶ Τροίῃ 17 ἦρωες κτείνοντο, Διὸς δ' ἐτελείετο βουλή.

11 There was once a time when countless groupings of humans, wandering aimlessly without cease throughout the earth, 12 weighted down on the broad-mass [platos] of Earth, her chest heavy. 13 And Zeus, seeing all this, took pity on her, and in his compressed thoughts 14 he put-together-a-plan [sun-tithenai] to alleviate Earth, the one who nourishes all, of her burden of humans. 15 He fanned the strife [eris] of the Trojan War, 16 in order to make the burden [= of overpopulation] disappear by way of death. And they, the ones in Troy, 17 those heroes were getting killed, and the Plan of Zeus was reaching its fulfillment [telos].

Cypria F 1.1-7[2]

§4. In these two passages, taken from the Iliad/Cypria, the expression *Διὸς δ' ἐτελείετο βουλή* at line 5/7 can be translated 'and the Will/Plan of Zeus was reaching its fulfillment [telos]'. And it is this telos or 'fulfillment', as expressed by the verb *telein* meaning 'reach fulfillment [telos]', that indicates not only the divergences but also the convergences in the plots of the two epics. The two epics begin at different points. The Cypria begins before the Trojan War gets underway, while the Iliad begins in the last of the ten years of the war's duration. And do the two epics end at different points? Yes they do, since the Cypria ends at a point that precedes the beginning of the Iliad, before the quarrel of Achilles and Agamemnon, while the Iliad ends at a point in epic time when Achilles has already killed Hector and has thus removed the danger of the fire that had threatened the ships of the Achaeans. So much for the divergence. But the convergence is more noteworthy: the actual fulfillment of both the Iliad and the Cypria is being signaled by the



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expression Διὸς δ' ἐτελείετο βουλή 'and the Will/Plan of Zeus was reaching its fulfillment [telos]' at lines 5 and 7 respectively. And that fulfillment is the loss of countless lives on both sides of the war. Both the Iliad and the Cypria highlight the loss of Achaean as well as Trojan lives, and here we see the ultimate convergence in the otherwise divergent plots of the two epics. The 'plan' of Zeus, which can be seen as the different plots of different epics, is really one grand Master Plan, which is the Will of Zeus. And, in terms of that overall Master Plan, Zeus wills the destruction of countless human lives, including Achaeans as well as Trojans. That is the ultimate Will of Zeus, and it converges with what we read at the beginning of the Cypria about the god's will. Moreover, the convergence extends to what we read at the beginning of the Homeric Iliad as well, although this epic does not make it explicit that the massive loss of human lives in the Trojan War also serves the purpose of relieving Mother Earth of bearing the heavy burden of all those heroes that are weighing down upon her and thus oppressing her, despite all her vastness. On the cosmic implications of this Plan of Zeus, I have already had a great deal to say at §§3–4 of my posting for [2016.05.19.\[3\]](#)

§5. I find it remarkable that the same convergent theme, highlighting the loss of countless lives on both sides of the Trojan War, recurs in the Odyssey by way of a reference to the boulai or 'plans' of Zeus. I quote the translation that I offered in my posting for [2015.04.10](#):

172 αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ πόσιος καὶ ἐδητύος ἐξ ἔρον ἔντο, 173 Μοῦσ' ἄρ' αἰοῖδὸν ἀνήκεν ἀειδέμεναι
κλέα ἀνδρῶν, 174 οἴμης, τῆς τὸτ' ἄρα κλέος οὐρανὸν εὐρὺν ἴκανε, 175 νεῖκος Ὀδυσσεύος καὶ
Πηλεΐδω Ἀχιλλῆος, 176 ὡς ποτε δηρίσαντο θεῶν ἐν δαιτὶ θαλαίῃ 177 ἐκπάγλοις ἐπέεσσιν,
ἄναξ δ' ἀνδρῶν Ἀγαμέμνων 178 χαίρει νόῳ, ὃ τ' ἄριστοι Ἀχαιῶν δηριόωντο. 179 ὡς γὰρ οἱ
χρείων μῦθ' ἴσαστο Φοῖβος Ἀπόλλων 180 Πυθοῖ ἐν ἡγαθῆρ, ὅθ' ὑπέρβη λάϊνον οὐδὸν
181 χρῆσόμενος. τότε γὰρ ῥα κυλίνδετο πῆματος ἀρχὴ 182 Τρωσὶ τε καὶ Δαναοῖσι Διὸς
μεγάλου διὰ βουλάς. 183 ταῦτ' ἄρ' αἰοῖδος ἄειδε περικλυτός· αὐτὰρ Ὀδυσσεύς . . .

172 When they had satisfied their desire for drinking and eating, 173 the Muse impelled the
singer to sing the glories [kleos plural] of men, 174 starting from a thread [oimē] [of a
song] that had at that time a glory [kleos] reaching all the way up to the vast sky. 175 It
was the quarrel [neikos] of Odysseus and Achilles son of Peleus, 176 how they once upon a
time [pote] fought at a sumptuous feast of the gods, 177 with terrible words, and the king
of men, Agamemnon, 178 was happy in his mind [noos] that the best of the Achaeans were
fighting. 179 For [gar] thus had oracular Phoebus Apollo prophesied to him, 180 at holy
Delphi, when he [Agamemnon] had crossed the stone threshold 181 to consult the oracle.
For [gar] then [tote] it was that the beginning of pain [pēma] started rolling down
182 upon both Trojans and Danaans, all on account of the plans [boulai] of great Zeus.
183 These things, then, the singer sang, whose fame is far and wide. As for Odysseus . . .

Odyssey 8.72–83

§6. I draw attention to the use here of the plural of boule, which I translate as 'plans': the poetry is talking about multiple 'plans' of Zeus, not about any single plan of the god. But these 'plans' of Zeus, which can be seen as the different plots of different epics, still converge as one grand Master Plan, which is the Will of Zeus. And, to repeat what I have already said about the overall Master Plan, Zeus wills the destruction of countless human lives, including Achaeans as well as Trojans. That, as I say, is the ultimate Will of Zeus. And the Odyssey here is clearly referring to the impending destruction of Achaeans as well as Trojans.

§7. The Will of Zeus may be clearly seen in the inner vision of a master Poet, but other mortals will find it difficult to understand the plans of the god. I cite here a most arresting Homeric passage that I had cited before in my posting for [2016.05.12](#). In this passage, we see Zeus sitting in grand isolation on a summit of Olympus, covered by a shining canopy of golden clouds, and the god is described as 'wrapped up' in his own thoughts, which are explicitly described as the boulai or 'plans' of Zeus:

ἀλλ' ὁ γὰρ ἄκρω Ὀλύμπῳ ὑπὸ χρυσεοῖσι νέφεσσιν | ἦστο Διὸς βουλήσιν ἐελμένος.

As for him [= Zeus], he was on a peak of Olympus, amidst golden clouds. | He was sitting there, all wrapped up in the plans [boulai] of Zeus.

Iliad 13.523–524

§8. As we can see from this description of Zeus all wrapped up in his divine thoughts, we mortals will always find it difficult to understand his boulai or 'plans'. To put it more precisely, the Will of Zeus will be difficult for all mortals to read, even for heroes—except for poets who are endowed with an inner vision of theological clarity.

§9. In the passage that I quoted earlier from Odyssey 8, the plans that Zeus is planning concern not only the events that happened during the Trojan War as narrated in such epics as the Cypria and the Iliad but also events that happened after the war, as narrated for example in the Odyssey itself. Here I return to my posting for [2015.05.27](#), where I had analyzed in some detail the micro-epic of Demodokos as embedded in Odyssey 8. This micro-epic, as I argued, merges the poetic agenda that are kept separate in the macro-epics of the Iliad and the Odyssey. And, correspondingly, this same micro-epic merges the plan of Zeus as it operates in the Iliad with the plan of Zeus as it operates in the Odyssey. These mergers are compatible with the plural form boulai 'plans' referring to the plot of the micro-epic at verse 82 of Odyssey 8, as opposed to the singular form boule 'plan' referring to the plot of the macro-epic at verse 5 of Iliad 1. Likewise in the Odyssey, as the book of Jim Marks has shown clearly, the whole plot of this macro-epic is driven by a singular plan of Zeus.[\[4\]](#)

§10. Here I return to the main point I need to make: mortals, even heroes, have difficulties in trying to read the Will of Zeus. That is why Telemachus says what he says in defending Phemios when this poet sings about the suffering of the Achaeans after the Trojan War. Telemachus claims that Phemios is not *aitios* or legally 'responsible' for the sad story that he narrates (Odyssey 1.347–348; see also 22.356); rather it is Zeus himself who is *aitios* (Odyssey 1.348).[5]

§11. But the gods can disclaim legal responsibility, as when Zeus says:

|32 ὦ πάνοι οἶον δὴ νυ θεοῦς βροτοὶ αἰτιῶνται. |33 ἐξ ἡμέων γάρ φασι κάκ' ἔμμεναι· οἱ δὲ
καὶ αὐτοὶ |34 σφῆσιν ἀτασθαλίῃσιν ὑπὲρ μόρον ἄλγε' ἔχουσιν.

|32 Oh my, how mortals hold us gods responsible [= *aitioi*]! |33 For they say that their misfortunes come from us. But they get their sufferings, |34 beyond what is fated, by way of their own acts of recklessness [*atasthaliai*].

Odyssey 1.32–34[6]

§12. I have analyzed this passage more thoroughly in an earlier project, and I here I offer merely a compressed version of my analysis.[7]

§12A. The notion that mortals are responsible for the misfortunes that they suffer as retribution for their wickedness is a prominent one in the Odyssey,[8] setting it apart from the Iliad, which stresses the Will of Zeus as the force that controls the plot of the epic.[9] In other words, whereas the Iliad stresses that a grand divine scheme is at work in all human actions, even when one mortal wrongs another, the Odyssey in contrast stresses the responsibility of mortals in committing any wrong. The difference, however, is not as great as it first seems. Even the Iliad acknowledges the legal responsibility of a wrongdoer, and even the Odyssey acknowledges a divine scheme in human actions. Thus when Agamemnon claims that not he but Zeus was *aitios* 'responsible' for his conflict with Achilles (Iliad 19.86), as the gods inflicted *atē* 'derangement' upon him (Iliad 19.87–88; 134–136), he nevertheless acknowledges that he is legally in the wrong and expresses his willingness to offer retribution for his wronging Achilles (Iliad 19.137–138). Conversely even the Odyssey acknowledges a grand divine scheme in the actual pattern of retribution for wrongdoing, most notably when Odysseus takes vengeance upon the reckless suitors through the active planning of the gods, especially of Athena.

§12B. At the risk of oversimplification, it could thus be said that the Iliad stresses the divine scheme in why a mortal commits a wrong, while the Odyssey stresses the divine scheme in how a mortal pays for that wrong. And such a scheme of things is the Will of Zeus.

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H24H. See Nagy 2013.

HC. See Nagy 2009|2008.

HPC. See Nagy 2010|2009.

HR. See Nagy 2003.

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Notes

[1] H24H 0§20.

[2] HPC I §270.

[3] As in that essay, I cite here too the insightful work of Rousseau 1996.

[4] Marks 2008.

[5] PH 238 = 8§33.

[6] PH 241 = 8§41.

[7] PH 241–242 = 8§§41–42.

[8] Odyssey 1.33–34, as quoted immediately above, should be understood in conjunction with 1.6–7.

[9] Further discussion in BA 113§24n3.

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